Tomorrow's heroes: focus on the Brightest Hopes

MOUNTAIN CLIMBING

FELIX PAPPALARDI talks in New York to Loraine Alterman

THE AMERICAN media has been hammering into people's heads that the solo singer/guitarist/songwriter is "in" and loud, exuberant rock is "out." But, the media forgot to examine box office receipts and album sales.

Groups like Mountain, Grand Funk Railroad and Black Sabbath are riding high. Mountain, under the leadership of bass player and producer Felix Pappalardi, stands out as the most musical and inventive in this category of American groups, and today they are voted Brightest Hope in the MM Pop Poll international section.

Felix, an eight-year veteran of the New York music scene, dismisses the media's game. "There's only two kinds of music, good music and bad music," he says. "Whether it's loud or soft, acoustic guitar or electric guitar, I don't really think that matters."

Mountain, made up of Felix, guitarist-vocalist Leslie West, keyboard man Steve Knight and drummer Corky Laing, won't be back in Great Britain until January, but Felix is looking forward to it.

He called the audiences in England last May "fantastic" and explains: "We found them very much the same as in America except that we were excited to be playing in Great Britain. We waited a long time. We were a band almost two years before we went so by that time we were used to about every kind of audience possible."

By "every kind" Felix means they've played everywhere from small halls to Woodstock and its offspring. Last summer Mountain sometimes played two festivals a day and Felix says he's sorry in a way that there aren't any festivals this year. "They were very exciting for Mountain to play," he explained in the New York office of his Windfall Music Enterprises.

"We considered ourselves a good festival band. We had a knack for it, you might say. We liked to get that thing happening with the audience and for some reason, a festival crowd was just good for us and receptive to us.

"We got them off and they got us off; it just snowballed. From that point of view festivals were great. There were problems but you know any time you have 75,000 to 100,000 people in one spot, you're bound to have problems."

Lately New York rock audiences have been behaving like Romans watching Christians being thrown to the lions. Enough is never enough and appreciation too often turns into rudeness with kids interrupting shows by shouting requests every five minutes as if the performer were their puppet.

Mountain, according to Felix, doesn't experience this. "I really love our audience," he says, "and Mountain does have a very distinctive audience in America. I think we play here in America to the most alive group of people on the scene as opposed to the nodouts and the dead heads and the dingdeadheads and the dingbats.

"Hundreds of concerts a year, especially the smaller ones where there are four and five thousand capacity halls, are the real proof of it. We find our audiences very receptive, very alive and yet very compassionate."

Since September 3 Mountain has been in the studio in New York working on their next album which Felix promises will be released on November 15. "we have enough material now for a double album," he says, "but I don't think we'll do that. As a producer I wouldn't want to do that right now. It wouldn't feel right. We'd like to do some experimentation in the studio and try out a lot of things and different instruments.

"Steve will be trying different keyboard instruments that we'll then be able to pull out of the studio and bring with us. There was a marked change between 'Climbing' and 'Nantucket Sleigh Ride.' I anticipate at least as much of a change between 'Nantucket Sleigh Ride' and this one."

Felix hopes to spend twice as much time in Britain in January as he did last May. "I'd like to do eight or ten concerts," he says, "and I'd like to be able to do more sessions. Leslie and I had the opportunity to do some sessions the last time we were there.

"We did some of the things on Bobby Keyes' new album with Jim Gordon and Nicky Hopkins. We enjoyed it very much and look forward to more of it next time we come over. This time our friends will know we're coming and if there's sessions going on, that's what we'd like to do. We'd like to get a lot more involved in what's happening there."

London holds a special place in Felix's heart because that's where he and Gail Collins were married in 1969. Just as talented as her husband, Gail writes lyrics with him (they started writing together in 1964), makes his spectacular clothes, and does all the artwork, design and photography for Mountain's album covers.

Aside from Mountain, Felix is producing Mylon and Holy Smoke, a new band out of Atlanta, whose first album will be released in America soon and guitarist David Rea whose album was just released. Holy Smoke has been touring America with the Who and Emerson, Lake and Palmer.

"I can only do three albums a year as a producer," says Felix. "I won't alow myself to attempt to do more because I'll have to let something slide and I never figured that was worth it. Regardless of what that fourth album is worth dollars wise a year, I don't want it.

"I'll do two Mountain albums a year and the third one will be another artist like this year either John Hammond Jr. or Albert King. Maybe a year will come along where I really feel I can handle four albums and then I'll do it, but that's not the plan."

Felix thinks the current rock nostalgia craze is fine, but doesn't think it's good to go backwards. "To leaf through the past is very healthy," he points out, "but to become totally submerged in it, I don't think, is at all healthy. I think we're just constantly looking for things that at least we haven't heard before.

"That's what improvisation is all about. Basically we're an improvisational band, I suppose, in a true sense as much as a jazz band and Brubeck. I mean we've been compared to Brubeck in this country as far as improvisation is concerned because of the way we conduct the major portion of our set every night.

"There's this new album out of the Atlanta Pop Festival-Isle of Wight. It's the first time that Mountain has had any extended stage playing out on record. We have a 2-minute version of Willie Dixon's 'Stormy Monday.' Although it was taped over a year ago, we're thrilled with it.

"That's hard to do. It's hard to love something that's over a year old regardless of how good it is."

While many New York musicians have moved out of the city to the country, Mountain remains.

Felix explains: "Every man in the band's got a house in the country, but we're city boys. I love the country, I love my farm in Nantucket (Massachusetts) but I love the city. The city gets me off."

Does it get him off musically? "I don't know about that. I can only speak for myself. If my music is inspired by or comes from, or has anything to do with the fact that I spent my entire life in the city, it's totally subliminal. I'm not aware of it. I'm sure maybe it's got something to do with it. Music is way too intangible for me to sort that out."

Being voted international Brightest Hope in the Melody Maker Pop Poll thrilled Felix. "The whole band really thanks everybody over there that made this particular bit of recognition for Mountain possible," he says. "It's very important to us. We never expected anything. When we found out about it, we were heavily knocked out."

FELIX PAPPALARDI and LESLIE WEST in action

Wishbone: brighter than bright

ANDY POWELL of Wishbone Ash

DESERVE: To earn by service; to merit. That dictionary quotation may loom rather ominously, but I'd like you to read it, and remember it, for when we're talking about Wishbone Ash, we've also got to talk about deserving things.

If Jack Spratt plays every night of the week, for meat without fat, for every day of his life, and to every conceivable audience, then he deserves meat without fat. He also deserves an occasional potato.

If a band, like Wishbone, play on, regardless of being fashionable, or unfashionable, liked or detested, cool or uncool, and criss-cross this country as many times as a B.R.S. wagoner, then they deserve some recognition.

If what they've been doing has been darned good into the bargain, then they deserve to be Brightest Hope. And it's all been done without an inkling, or even the merest suggestion of hype, or ear-blasting from any publicity monster. They just went out, and did it themselves.

They are in the States at the moment—it's the second time they've been, and it seems odd not to see their name gracing half-a-dozen gigs in the back pages of the MM. You might not have noticed, but over the past year there has been one band figuring more than most in those club ads—Wishbone. You just can't stop 'em working, and as it turns out now, you can't stop people wanting them to work.

They've risen from the depths of very small print in the bottom right-hand corners of festival bills, to a remarkable rock band in their very own right. And if we take it on a music level, they've only just started Phase Two.

Phase one brought a steady—far from incredible—start. I didn't particularly take a liking to the album, but parts of it were good enough to say: yes—promising. And besides, as a live band, they rapidly impressed upon people that they were one of the better ones to watch. And musically, they kept on telling people that, and musically, they got a whole lot better—by the week, month, and now the year.

They played London's Marquee a few months back, and it stands in my memory as the best gig I've seen, or am likely to see, at Marquee this year. Not just the Marquee actually, I'll link up a load of other places.

In Wishbone's case it's not just a lot of supplying original rock 'n' roll. They supply it, and they deliver it beautifully. As musicians they are terrifyingly professional — in the old sense of the word if you like. There's no use of volume as a scapegoat for inadequacy, they are pro players, and they tackle their complex workload with the ease that talent blesses on the owner.

On a technical basis, the guitar partnership between Ted Turner and Andy Powell is as complete, and as complementing in tandem as is good brown bread to the very best cheese. Both are outstandingly different in technique, but they merge at an enviable junction of control, from which stems correct, musical improvisation. The scores are rigid, but like locks, they are capable of opening when pressure, or lack of it is desired. At any time. The music has got to be rigid, so it can stand up on its own, leaving both players with a basis that instigates freedom.

Then there's this extraordinary bassist called Martin Turner. If you've seen this guy once, you can't wait to see him again.

Turner is what you might first call a chord bassist. He tends to prefer a fusion of chords, rather than riffy plodding. Not that he ignores the bass lines essential to good rock, but he modifies what has become a somewhat boring ingredient. He's made it stand right out, and his neo-classical solo is purely an example of just how far he's got into this instrument.

Steve Upton: drummer. Well, he's workmanlike, and he has to be. He's tricky and precise without being sterile. He also has an unlimitable imagination, which within the Wishbone complex, is given more than enough room to breathe.

When you talk to Wishbone you'll notice that they're modestly proud of being hard workers. They aren't daft, they know they're good, and they also know they've never got to face a pricking conscience. They've never done anything for gain, except what they were formed to do.

"There's a number of soft things we like to do," Andy Powell once told me, "and we do them. We aren't a band who sits down and say we can't do this 'cause it's not heavy. We don't have such things as restrictions."

Well, I've heard a lot of people say that, and they've been kidding themselves very nicely. But Powell was right, Wishbone are a warming bright hope—and it's good to see that plain, honest hard work still pays off. Poll winners, right, and so they should be. They deserve it — ROY HOLLINGWORTH

PEEL APPEAL

JOHN Peel has once again found himself voted as top DJ in the Melody Maker Poll, and his Sunday Show is the top radio show for the first time.

It was five years ago that Peel first became a leading disc jockey when he was voted into seventh place down the list behind pop men such as Jimmy Savile. In 1968 for the time he came top of the poll, and since then it has become almost a foregone conclusion that Peel will be at the top.

"It's good for the ego," said Peel about this year's poll, "But I don't think it signifies anything. Remember the poll only signifies what Melody Maker readers feel, and there are a lot more people than your readers listening to the radio.

"This year I was very surprised when I found out I had won again, because there are other people playing similar music to what I am. Last year I wasn't at all surprised because there was no-one else playing progressive music on their radio shows.

"I think people just voted for me because it has become the thing to do. This year I was astounded because I thought I was going to take a dive. Obviously it's not going to keep going on forever, and I expect either Alan Black or Bob Harris will take over.

"When you have been going for four years people see you as becoming a bit of a cliche, and people like to vote for something new. I think that is why Top Gear hasn't won this year."

Deflated

The fact that the Sunday Show, which is down to the featured live group and not Peel's character, has been voted the top radio show and not Top Gear has left him feeling slightly deflated. Top Gear is the programme that all his energy goes into, whereas the Sunday Show is a matter of picking the right group to get over the airwaves.

"I certainly hope Top Gear can get back up again next year, and I shall certainly work hard to get back there. That has disappointed me, because I work very hard on Top Gear and all my energy goes into that one weekly programme. I don't have all that much to do with the Sunday Show, and that programme is down to the group as to how well it goes over," said Peel.

But Peel is pleased that he is still number one in the

DJ poll, and he says that it is "nice to know people care."

"It's difficult when you are 32 to retain any kind of credibility. Most of the kids who vote in these things are half my age. The only way you can do it is by being very honest with them. If I play a track from a Grand Funk Railroad album I have to be honest and say that I don't like it, otherwise there would be no point."

TICKETS